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Dancing by Numbers: Dance's Expanding Presence in Library Classifications of the Progressive Era

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DANCING BY NUMBERS:

Dance's Expanding Presence in Library Classifications of the Progressive
Era

Paper presented by
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at the Society of Dance History Scholars

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Library classifications are artificial systems that use numbers, letters, and/or arbitrary symbols to organize the contents of libraries¹. The guiding principle of these systems is a logical division of knowledge into coded categories. As the librarian Josephus N. Larned noted in 1882, library classifications are “the organic anatomy of human knowledge.”² The three most widespread classification systems of the Progressive Era—the Dewey Decimal, Cutter Expansive, and Library of Congress Classifications—offer a unique perspective to study the status and identity of dance as a component of knowledge.³

The Progressive Librarian and Classification

After the creation of the American Library Association in 1876, and increasingly after 1890, classification became an important subject of discussion among librarians.⁴ The numerous articles published from 1890 until 1930 fit well into Progressive Era discourse. Three main Progressive-Era ideals recur: economy, efficiency and education.

Progressive librarians realized that “as organization based on knowledge becomes prevalent, the knowledge in books becomes increasingly valuable.”⁵ Bringing order to this knowledge by classifying libraries became of utmost importance because it ensured “economy and increased efficiency in the use of books.”⁶ Indeed, as Ernest Cushing Richardson explained, classification “saves in the first place actual labor on the part of users and librarians in assembling any given mass of material for use.”⁷

Though many classification systems were developed between 1876 and 1930, some librarians saw “superior practical advantages” in adopting or adapting a few tried and true ones.⁸ Melvil Dewey wrote that, “By adopting a scheme already worked out he [the librarian] saves much time and money, gains the immense advantage of using a system in common with many others, so that he may utilize their labors and investigations and share them in the economy of co-operation.”⁹

For progressive librarians who saw the library as “a machine got together to instill ... knowledge into men’s minds,” and the public library “as the true people’s university,” classification became an important tool in the education of the masses.¹⁰ In 1901, Richardson explained: “there is the greater educational advantage in the actual incentive to the reader to read or a least ... browse through books in order to pick out certain things.¹¹ In other words, classification makes it possible for people browsing the shelves to get a full view of what has been written on a particular topic. For researchers, it “becomes of still greater importance to the progress of knowledge.”¹²

Dewey Decimal Classification

If you have been in a public library in United States, you are familiar with the Dewey Decimal Classification because it is today the most used classification system not only in American public libraries, but also in libraries worldwide.¹³ (Here is a picture of books classified using this system, and here are some call numbers).

Melvil Dewey devised the Decimal Classification for the Amherst College library in 1873 and published it anonymously in 1876.¹⁴ The Decimal Classification was innovative.¹⁵ Until then, librarians used what was called “fixed notation” to indicate the exact location of books within a library. For example, the book number 1254.30 would indicate that the book “was on the first floor [of the library], in the second room, in the fifth case, on the fourth shelf in that case, and the thirtieth book on the shelf, counting from the left.”¹⁶ Such notation worked well until a shelf, or a room, or a library was full, at which point books had to be relocated and therefore relabeled.

Dewey realized that fixed notation was not efficient: at a time when libraries were growing rapidly, it was time-consuming and costly to relabel books. To solve this problem, he devised an ingenious classification system that organizes books by subjects regardless of where they are located within the library. He divided the library into ten classes; each class, into ten divisions, and each division, into ten sections.¹⁷ Therefore, the entire content of the library is divided into 1,000 sections

representing 1,000 subjects, each of which corresponds to an Arabic whole number. By using decimals, the schemata can be expanded infinitely into minute subdivisions.

For dance scholars today, it is obvious that dance should figure in the Fine Arts class of the Decimal Classification. But unlike sculpture, painting, and music, dance is not one of the ten divisions of this class; neither is it one of the one hundred sections. To find out about dance, one has to consult the index, where “many subjects, apparently omitted, will be found,” to learn that “dancing” should be classified in the 793 section (“in-door amusements”), along with books about games, crocheting, and needlework.¹⁸ Clearly, Dewey did not perceive dance as one of the main art forms; instead he considered it a “minor subject” related to indoor amusements and feminine occupations.¹⁹ In essence, he believed that dance did not deserve the same treatment as other arts.

As the Decimal Classification was adopted by several American libraries, it became evident that some improvements were desirable.²⁰ For this reason, Dewey published new enlarged editions of his classification. He fine-tuned his tables and added new words to the index.²¹ You can see on the screen that the dance terms included in the first three editions of the Decimal Classification increased from one word in 1876 to five in 1885 and eight in 1888.²² The terms in parentheses appear in the index; the others, directly in the tables. The terms listed are simple, almost naive. The 1888 edition finally recognizes the existence of one form of theatrical dance: ballet. Although this edition shows definite progress over the first edition, it still lacks a main section devoted to dance, unlike music, which is described in a detailed nearly three-page long table. Instead, dance remains a minor subject that is still classified under more important subjects (ethics, social customs, and amusements). The result is that, in libraries using the Decimal Classification, dance books are scattered and mixed with books on other topics, such as charades and scalping.²³ The table on the screen represents the so-called “organic anatomy” of dance knowledge at the beginning of the Progressive Era.

After 1888, Dewey continued to make improvements to his classification. The nine editions of his manual published during the Progressive Era grew considerably, as you can see in this table.²⁴ Despite this fact, however, the dance classification remained static until 1927. Dewey did not consider

dance a high priority, finding other more pressing sections to improve. We will come back to the 1927 edition later.

Cutter Expansive Classification

I doubt anyone here is familiar with the Cutter Expansive Classification because today it is used in only a few libraries. Yet, during the Progressive Era, it was the second most popular classification system.²⁵ Its creator, Charles Ammi Cutter, died in 1903 before the classification was completed, thus leading to its demise.²⁶ (You can see on the screen books still classified using this system at the library where Cutter was librarian).

Cutter thought that knowledge was too vast to be divided into only ten main classes.²⁷ He also believed that classification should be adapted to the size of libraries: a small library with a thousand volumes does not need as detailed a classification as a large library of 100,000 volumes. Therefore, Cutter created a letter-based classification system with seven different schemes for libraries of different sizes.²⁸ The first classification, “for a very small library,” has only eight classes.²⁹ As libraries grow, classes and sections become more detailed and numerous.³⁰ The first through sixth classifications were published between 1891 and 1893. The seventh classification, for the largest libraries, was never completed, but several of its schedules were published between 1896 and 1911.³¹ The system is logical, “grouping together classes which have a practical connection.”³²

Only two dance terms are found in the first through sixth classifications: dancing and ballet. In the first classification, Cutter classes these terms within Sciences and Arts, both Useful and Fine; in the second and third classifications, within the “Recreative Arts, Sports and Games, Theatre, Music”; and in the fourth and fifth classifications, within the “Recreative arts, Sports, Games.” By the sixth classification, dancing is finally incorporated as its own section within the schedules: it is subclass VQ of the V class labeled “Athletic and recreative arts.”

In the seventh classification, dancing becomes subclass VS instead of VQ and is divided into subjects: by place (numbers 13 to 99 stand for specific geographic locations); alphabetically by type or genre; and by type of balls.³³ The alphabetic system used for dance type or genre (VSM stands for “Minuet”; VSW, for “Waltz”) makes it easy for a librarian to create new shelf marks for specific dance forms when needed. By using the label “Theatrical dancing,” Cutter acknowledges the existence of theatrical dance forms other than ballet.

Four dance terms appear in other sections of the seventh classification: dancing games, war dances, dance and dancing.³⁴ The total number of dance terms in the seventh classification is therefore seventeen, nearly twice as many as in the Decimal Classification.³⁵ Despite its immense progress toward a better understanding of the “organic anatomy” of dance knowledge, Cutter’s dance classification, less than half a page long, remains much less developed than that of other arts: the theater section, for example, is three pages long; the music, sixteen.

Library of Congress Classification

The Library of Congress Classification was developed over many years, starting in 1897.³⁶ It divides knowledge into twenty-one main classes denoted by letters; for subdivisions, letters and Arabic numbers are added. Today, it is the classification system used in most American academic libraries. Dancing appears in the GV subclass labeled “Sports and amusements. Games” which is part of the “Geography--Anthropology” class. (Here are some books about dance classified using this system at the Yale University Library and here are call numbers).

While Cutter had given an entire subclass to dance (VQ), the Library of Congress allots only a section of a subclass to it: GV1580 to GV1798. Nevertheless, at four pages in length, this schedule is much more developed than either Cutter’s or Dewey’s dance tables. But, it is much less developed than the Library of Congress music class that was first published in 1904 as a 112-page volume. The

fact that dance follows “Jugglery, legerdemain, etc.” and precedes “Shows, circuses, etc.,” seems to imply that it was still not considered as serious or important an art as the other arts.³⁷

Since the Library of Congress dance schedule is four pages long, I cannot list all of its fifty-one terms.³⁸ Therefore, I will focus only on important new terms. This slide shows the main subdivisions of the dance schedule. The “General” section includes “Esthetics” and “Psychology” which confirm the evolution of dance as an art form and a discipline that can be studied from different perspectives. The “History” of dance is finally validated as a subject. Whereas in the Decimal Classification, the ethics of dance is subsumed under ethics, in the Library of Congress classification, it is subsumed under dance. “Folk Dances,” “Morris dance,” “Polka,” and “Two-step” make their debut in an American classification system. The “Technique. Instruction” section presents dance as an independent discipline that can be taught. With its mention of “Revival of old dances,” this section accepts historical dance as a field of knowledge.

The term “Theatrical dancing” is not new – Cutter had used it before – but the Library of Congress Classification attests to the existence of a wider variety of theatrical dance, including “Buck and wing.” For the first time a biography section is included in a dance classification. It is interesting to note that Isadora Duncan is the only subject of a biography mentioned in the entire 1910 G class. Finally, the “drills, parades,” and “gymnastic dancing” terms show the association of dance with physical training.

A second edition of the G Class, now containing fifty-seven dance terms, was published in 1928. The development of dance education during the Progressive Era can be seen in three additions: the reference to “Study and Teaching”; “Individual schools”; and Dances for schools.” Finally, the biography table lists two new important names: Fanny Elssler and Anna Pavlova, and assigns them specific call numbers. These new additions indicate not only that librarians had a better understanding of the “organic anatomy” of dance knowledge and recognized that the discipline of dance was evolving, but also that literature on these subjects was added to libraries.

Back to Dewey

Meanwhile, the Decimal Classification continued to evolve. In 1927, the number of dance terms had increased sharply from eight to forty-five. There are now two new separate subdivisions for dance: one is in the theater section; the other in the indoor amusements section. They include many terms that cannot be found in the Expansive and 1910 Library of Congress Classifications: for example, “Fairy scenes,” “Choreography,” “Theatric dancing,” “Characteristic” and “Old French dances,” “mazurka, redowa, schottish,” “tango,” and “Dances with[/and without] accessory features,” such as “4-step,” “lancers,” “Virginia reel.” To find the source of terms like these, and of the new structure used in the Decimal Classification, we have to go to Brussels. There in 1895, Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine founded the Institut international de bibliographie, an enterprise that was trying to create what we could call the analog Google of the Progressive Era: a research tool that contained information on publications of all time, in all countries, and on all subjects.³⁹ With Dewey’s permission, Otlet and La Fontaine adopted, translated, and greatly expanded the Decimal Classification, including the dance tables, to fit the needs of their institute. The first complete edition of the *Classification bibliographique décimale* was published in 1905. For many years, there were talks of reconciling the American and Belgian decimal classifications.⁴⁰ The two dance sections in Dewey’s 1927 edition are the result of such work.⁴¹

Conclusion

As we saw, the “organic anatomy” of dance knowledge evolved during the Progressive Era. At the beginning, dance is perceived only as an amusement, a moral issue, and a social custom. In the early 1890s, Cutter devises a separate section for dance within the recreative arts. By the 1910s, the Library of Congress classification provides a much more detailed analysis of dance as a subject—within the subclass of “Sports and amusements. Games”—including dance history, ethics, aesthetics, psychology of dance, technique and instruction, biography, gymnastic dancing, and so forth. In the late 1920s, “choreography,” the development of dance education, and a wider variety of dances, such as

tango, are recognized. By the end of this period, from the point of view of library taxonomies, dance has evolved organically into a recognized art form and discipline.

¹ An Apple Keynote Presentation with illustrative examples accompanied this lecture. For a copy, contact the author at dominique.bourassa@yale.edu.

² Josephus N. Larned, "Classification," *Library Journal* 7, 7-8 (July-August 1882): 125.

² According to Corinne Bacon, by 1916, the Dewey Decimal, the Cutter Expansive, and the Library of Congress Classifications were the "three systems most used in United States." Corinne Bacon, "Classification," *Manual of Economy*, A.L.A. Reprints (Chicago: American Library Publishing Board, 1916), 8.

⁴ During the Progressive Era, librarians already considered the year 1876, the beginning of a new era in American librarianship. See, for example, C. Martel, "Classification: A Brief Conspectus of Present Day Library Practice," *Library Journal* 36 (January-December 1911): 411-412.

⁵ Henry E. Bliss, "The Problem and the Theory of Library Classification," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 11, 4 (July 1917): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25685554>.

⁶ Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification: Theoretical and Practical* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 58. On this subject, C. Martel writes in "Classification: A Brief Conspectus of Present Day Library Practice" (410): "classification is an economy; Bliss adds in "The Problem and

the Theory of Library Classification” (201): “The books of a growing collection are to be classified with regard to utility, convenience, and economy.”

⁷ Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification: Theoretical and Practical*, 53.

⁸ C. Martel, “Classification: A Brief Conspectus of Present Day Library Practice,” 411.

⁹ Melvil Dewey, *Decimal Classification and Relativ Index for Arranging, Cataloging and Indexing Public and Private*.... 2th ed. (Boston: Library Bureau, 1885), 49. Dewey was an ardent advocate of spelling reforms. In 1886, he funded the Spelling Reform Association. In this text, quotes from Dewey’s works will use Dewey’s spellings. Charles Ammi Cutter had already similar comments in 1879: “I would seriously recommend him [the librarian] ... to adopt some of the systems already in use, and especially either Mr. Dewey’s Amherst decimal scheme, or my own Boston Athenaeum scheme. ... And if he takes one or the other of these two plans, he will come into harmony with a certain number of other libraries. All cooperation is very much helped by uniformity of methods.”

Charles Ammi Cutter, “Classification on the Shelves,” *Library Journal* 4 (July/August 1879): 234.

¹⁰ Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification Theoretical and Practical*, 53; Melvil Dewey, “Decimal Classification beginning”, *Library Journal* (February 15, 1920): 151. Already in 1882, Josephus N. Larned wrote in “Classification” (125) that, “it is to popularize the means of learning, — to open and ease the paths by which knowledge is pursued, — that a better practical classification of books is continually sought.” Bliss remarked in 1912 that the educational value of good classification “is appreciated by the best members of a library’s constituency. It dignifies the library as an embodiment of knowledge.” Henry H. Bliss, “Conservatism in Library Classification,” *Library Journal* 37 (January-December, 1912): 667.

¹¹ Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification: Theoretical and Practical*, 57.

¹² Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification: Theoretical and Practical*, 57.

¹³ The Dewey Decimal Classification “has been translated into 30 languages and is used by 200,000 libraries in 135 countries.” *Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, s. v. “Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC),” accessed Feb. 23, 2015, http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_d.aspx#dewey.

¹⁴ [Melvil Dewey], *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library*. Amherst, MA: [s.n.], 1876.

¹⁵ Corinne Bacon, “Classification” (14), notes “while Mr. Dewey was not the first or the only man to use relative location, decimals, or an index, he was the first to combine these in the way that he did and get into print.”; Henry E. Bliss, in “Conservatism in Library Classification,” (668) writes that the Decimal Classification “especial credit is that it has been the first great embodiment of the principles of relative location and expansibility.”

¹⁶ Charles Ammi Cutter, “Classification on the Shelves,” 234.

¹⁷ Melvil Dewey wrote in *A Classification and Subject Index* (3-4) that his system had nine classes or heads, nine divisions, and nine sections numbered from one to nine. He regarded the number zero, which he reserved for books on general topics, to have “zero power.” He also admitted that, “theoretically, the division of every subject into just nine heads is absurd.”

¹⁸ [Melvil Dewey], *A Classification and Subject Index*, 6, 20, 26-27, 32-33. In his 1885, *Decimal Classification and Relativ Index* (32), Dewey called the index, “the most important feature of the system.”

¹⁹ The expression “minor subjects” appear for the first time in [Melvil Dewey], *A Classification and Subject Index*, 4.

²⁰ According to Arthur Fremont Rider, by 1910, “over six thousand libraries, large and small, and scattered over every country in the civilized world, were using the Decimal Classification.” Arthur Fremont Rider, “Old Classifications—and the excuse for new ones,” *Library Journal* 35, 9 (September 1910): 287.

²¹ In 1885, Melvil Dewey wrote in his *Decimal Classification and Relativ Index* (32) that the “list of subjects [in the index] is the most complete that could be made by combining all the headings of all the leading catalogs and bibliografies, and adding to the list all that users of the system hav found omitted in ten years’ experience.”

²² List compiled from [Melvil Dewey], *A Classification and Subject Index*; Melvil Dewey, *Decimal Classification and Relativ Index* (1885); Melvil Dewey, *Decimal Classification and Relativ Index for Arranging, Cataloging and Indexing Public and Private....* 3rd ed. (Boston : Library Bureau, 1888).

²³ Some progressive librarians recognized that this was a problem. For example, Henry H. Bliss, in “Conservatism in Library Classification” (661), wrote: “When the several branches of a subject are separated, the investigator may have to pass inconveniently from stack to stack.”

²⁴ This table was created using data from Melvil Dewey, *Decimal Clasification and Relativ Index for Libraries and Personal Use*, rev. and enlarged under the dir. of Dorcas Fellows. (Lake Placid: Forest Press, 1927), 11.

²⁵ C. Martel, C., “Classification: A Brief Conspectus of Present Day Library Practice”, 412.

²⁶ On this subject, see R. Conrad Winke, “The Contracting World of Cutter’s Expansive Classification,” *Library Resources & Technical Services* 48, 2 (April 2004): 122-129.

²⁷ Cutter believed that “the ten digits which mark the primary classes [of the Decimal Classification] are not divided equally into through the field of knowledge.” Charles Ammi Cutter, “Another Plan for Numbering Books,” *Library Journal* 3 (September 1878): 248.

²⁸ At first, Cutter considered creating a classification system with five expansions: the first “for a library of 1,000 volumes”; the second, “for a library of 1,000-5,000 volumes”; the third, “for a library of 5,000-10,000 volumes; the fourth, “for a library of 10,000-20,000 volumes”; and the fifth for a library of 20,000-100,000 volumes”: Charles Ammi Cutter, “A Notation for Small Libraries,” *Library Journal*, 12 (September/October 1887): 430.

²⁹ Cutter says that the history class (E) can also be divided into three classes (E - Biography, F – History; and G Geography and Travels) increases the number of classes to ten. Charles Ammi Cutter, *Expansive Classification. Part I: The First Six Classifications* (Boston: C.A. Cutter, 1891-93), 18.

³⁰ R. Conrad Winke remarks in “The Contracting World of Cutter’s Expansive Classification” (123) that, “because of its strictly alphabetic notation—which used up to four letters per class, permitting therefore a total of 367,280 possible subject areas—it [the Expansive Classification] was both accommodating of new subjects and economical in notation.”

³¹ R. Conrad Winke, “The Contracting World of Cutter’s Expansive Classification,” 123.

³² Charles Ammi Cutter, “Classification on the Shelves,” 237.

³³ Cutter created this schedule sometimes between 1896 and 1901. The date of publication is unknown.

³⁴ The term “dancing” appears as “Singing and dancing games” (VLS) in the VL subclass labeled “Other outdoor and indoor games and exercises”; war dances can be classified either with war games (VCY) in “Fighting sports,” or as section PZKN of the “War customs” (PZKM-PZKR) in “Primitive culture” (PZ); and “Dance” and “Dancing” (PZHR) can also be classified in the “Amusements” (PZH) section of the “Primitive culture.” (PZ)

³⁵ It is interesting to note that Cutter did not include dancing, even ballet and theatrical dance, among the expressive arts, preferring to keep it within the recreative arts. Cutter believed his “expressive Arts” section, which includes mimetic art, theatre and music, makes a logical transition between the recreative and fine arts. See, for example, Charles Ammi Cutter, “The Expansive Classification,” 87.

³⁶ For a detailed history of the development and description of the Library of Congress Classification, see Leo E. LaMontagne, *American Library Classification : With Special Reference to the Library of Congress* (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1961), 221-349.

³⁷ The Library of Congress followed Cutter in assigning the G class to geography. However, it added to Cutter’s L class (anthropology and ethnology), and Cutter’s recreative arts section. On the subject of the G class, the British Librarian W.C. Berwick Sayers (*Canons of Classification Applied to “the Subject” “the Expansive”, “the Decimal” and “the Library of Congress” Classifications: A Study in Bibliographical Classification Method* [London: Grafton; White Plains, N.Y.: H.W. Wilson, 1915-16], p. 138) wrote: “Class G, Geography and Anthropology, is one of the most curious in the system, an may be said to cover the world, its exploration, scientific measurement and plotting; its inhabitants, their kind, distribution, folk-lore, culture, customs and amusements—this location of the recreative arts is curious and noteworthy.”

³⁸ This number does not include all countries and the historical periods listed in the two “History” sections, but it includes two terms (dancing games and primitive dances) that appear elsewhere in the G class.

³⁹ Institut International de Bibliographie, *Manuel du répertoire bibliographique*. (Bruxelles: Institut international de bibliographie, 1905), 18-19. The Répertoire bibliographique universel has been called the “Google de papier.” See, for example, “Récapitulatif de l’exposition Renaissance 2.0: Voyage aux origines du Web,” accessed March 21, 2015,

http://www.mundaneum.org/ressourcespeda/chapitre05/PDF/resume_expo.pdf

⁴⁰ In 1923, the Commission internationale de la classification décimale (C.C.) was formed by the Institut international de bibliographie (I.I.B.) to try to unify the two editions. On this subject, see F. Donker Duyvis, *Report on the Commission Internationale de la Classification Décimale (C.C.)* ([Bussels?]: [Commission internationale de la classification décimale], [1927]), 1. Full reconciliation between the two editions was never accomplished. In 1933, the two editions split and the Classification décimale universelle.

⁴¹ Melvil Dewey, *Decimal Classification and Relative Index*, 12th ed., p. 47, thanked the “Institut international de Bibliographie for its great volume of valuable work, covering almost the whole range of subjects, and also for its advice and criticism during progress of our own expansions.”